
Rameron Pigeons *Columba arquatrix* drinking and bathing

Giles Mulholland

Des Pigeons rameron *Columba arquatrix* venant boire et se baigner. L'auteur rapporte des observations, faites de 1998 à 2003, de Pigeons rameron *Columba arquatrix* venant boire et se baigner dans un étang artificiel d'un jardin de Bryanston, une banlieue de Johannesburg, Afrique du Sud. Occasionnellement, des oiseaux se posaient même directement au milieu de l'étang, se baignaient et 'nageaient' jusqu'à 2 m, leurs mouvements semblant indiquer qu'ils utilisaient leurs pattes. On sait que de nombreuses espèces de pigeon se baignent quand elles en ont l'occasion, mais cela ne semble pas encore avoir été décrit pour le Pigeon rameron et la 'nage' semble être inhabituelle.

Although pigeons need water to moisten and help digest their food (del Hoyo *et al.* 1997) and most drink regularly (Goodwin 1983), Rameron Pigeon *Columba arquatrix* is said to drink only rarely (Rowan 1983, Urban *et al.* 1986) and bathing appears to be undocumented. According to Rowan (1983), 'Oatley remarks that he has never seen a Rameron Pigeon come to water, despite many hours spent in hides beside pools in forests where the birds were present'. This note documents casual observations over five years (1998–2003) of Rameron Pigeons drinking and bathing in a garden in Bryanston, a suburb of northern Johannesburg, South Africa.

Observations

The garden contains two ponds connected by a 2-m rocky waterfall. The upper pond, which measures c.3 x 3 m and is 1 m deep in the centre, contains a few water-lilies and a small clump of *Cyperus* reeds in a corner, and is surrounded by slate tiles, providing a low lip and excellent visibility all around.

Rameron Pigeons started arriving one hour after sunrise, in singles, pairs, small groups of 3–4 or flocks of up to 15, but most waited until at least two hours after sunrise. The next two hours were a peak drinking period. A few pigeons (usually singles or groups of 2–3) continued to visit the pond throughout the remainder of the day, with a noticeable increase c.1–2 hours before sunset. Overall, c.100–150 birds visited the pond every day. As their drinking frequency is unknown, it is possible that birds did not drink daily.

The pigeons invariably first perched in a half-dead *Saphora japonica* tree 5 m away from the

upper pool, where they waited for 30 seconds to several minutes before descending to drink. Those that had arrived in a group usually returned to the tree after drinking, until all members of the group had finished, before flying off. Singles or pairs usually flew off directly after drinking. Birds descended singly or in twos or threes to the spot around the lip of the top of the waterfall, where up to 10 congregated. Some perched on the rocks beside the stream and bent down to reach the water 15 cm below. The majority moved to the pond's slate edge, from where some drank, while others (30%) hopped onto the lip of the waterfall (an area of c.40 x 40 cm, where the water was only 4 cm deep). Those that drank from the slate usually immersed their bill almost up to their eyes (Fig. 1), whereas those that stood in the water at the lip usually submerged most of the breast while drinking (Fig. 2).

Many pigeons (c.15%) took the opportunity to bathe. This was usually affected by jumping from the slate to the lip of the waterfall, from where they lowered themselves into the water, ruffled their feathers and flapped their wings (Fig. 3). They usually submerged themselves so that at least half of their body was underwater, maintaining this position for up to 30 seconds. Sometimes, they 'pushed off' from the bank and swam out for up to 1 m (Fig. 4) before taking off directly from the water after up to 10 seconds. After bathing, they only occasionally preened, on the slate or in the tree. A few instances were observed—invariably when several birds were bathing already—where a bird landed directly in the middle of the pond, bathed and 'swam' for up to 20 seconds before taking off. Pigeons sometimes 'swam' for up

to 2 m, and their body movements suggested they used their feet when doing so.

Discussion

Rowan (1983) suggested that Rameron Pigeons, which take a variety of fruits of indigenous and exotic trees (Rowan 1983, Urban *et al.* 1986), under ordinary conditions obtain the water they require from their food. In the Johannesburg area, their diet during the long dry season perhaps includes a high proportion of dry fruit, requiring a higher water intake. However, I did not observe any clear seasonal (winter or summer) differences in drinking or bathing, nor in different temperature (0–30°C) or wind conditions (calm to very windy). Other observers in Johannesburg, responding to requests from the SABirdnet Internet forum, only reported occasional drinking by Rameron Pigeons (rarely more than single observations). The paucity of records appears to suggest that birds fly long distances to only a small number of widely scattered drinking sites.

Although many pigeon species are known to bathe when they have access to suitable water (Goodwin 1983), bathing of Rameron Pigeons does not seem to have been described before and the behaviour ('swimming') appears to be unusual. Red-eyed Doves *Streptopelia semitorquata*, which often drank in association with the Rameron Pigeons, occasionally bathed too, but none was ever observed 'swimming'. Ring-necked *S. capicola* and Laughing Doves *S. senegalensis* came to drink, but were never observed bathing. Speckled Pigeons *Columba guinea*, which also occasionally visited the garden, were not observed to drink.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Callan Cohen for suggesting I write this note. Callan Cohen, Ron Demey and Michel Louette commented on a draft and helped with references.

References

- Goodwin, D. 1983. *Pigeons and Doves of the World*. Second edn. London, UK: Trustees of the Br. Mus. (Nat. Hist).
- del Hoyo, J., Elliott, A. & Sargatal, J. (eds.) 1997. *Handbook of the Birds of the World*. Vol. 4. Barcelona: Lynx Edicions.
- Rowan, M. K. 1983. *The Doves, Parrots, Louries and Cuckoos of Southern Africa*. Cape Town: David Philip.
- Urban, E. K, Fry, C. H. & Keith, S. (eds.) 1986. *The Birds of Africa*. Vol. 2. London, UK: Academic Press.

Farm Rietvlei 295JT, Nelspruit, South Africa. E-mail: gilesmulholland@yahoo.co.uk

Captions to figures on page 146

Figures 1–4. Rameron Pigeons *Columba arquatrix* drinking and bathing, Bryanston, Johannesburg, South Africa (Giles Mulholland)

Pigeons rameron *Columba arquatrix* venant boire et se baigner, Bryanston, Johannesburg, Afrique du Sud (Giles Mulholland)